

Great Point Lighthouse  
Great Point  
Nantucket  
Nantucket County  
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-1006

HABS  
MAEC  
10-NANT  
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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

## GREAT POINT LIGHTHOUSE

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Location: Great Point, (formerly Sandy Point) on the northern extremity of the Island of Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Present Owner: United States Government

Present Occupant: Same

Present Use: Lighthouse, as a guide and warning to ships at sea.

Brief Statement of Significance: One of the oldest and most important lighthouses on the coast.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: U. S. Government, now under the jurisdiction of the U. S. Coast Guard.
2. Date of erection: Present lighthouse built in 1818. (Abstract: Lighthouse Report of 1838, in National Archives, Washington, D. C.)
3. Architect: Built of stone by masons in accordance with Government specifications.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: None known. Stone tower, painted white, 60 feet high and 70 feet above sea level, with eighty-four steps to the lantern which is 8½ feet high and 9 feet in diameter.
5. Notes on alterations and additions: Building not changed. Keeper's house, which with several small outbuildings stood close to the Light, was recently entirely destroyed by fire.

In 1851 the beacon had fourteen lamps, arranged in two parallel circles. In 1857 the tower was fitted with a Fresnal lens; whale oil was used as fuel for the lamps for many years, as well as colza, lard oil and mineral oil. In 1945 the light was produced by incandescent oil-vapor apparatus, in which kerosene in vaporized form is burned under a mantle. Its 12,000 candlepower has a fourteen mile visibility range. (Abstract: "Famous New England Lighthouses", Snow, 1945; Historic Nantucket, July, 1956.)

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: An early name for Great Point was Sandy Point.

The first lighthouse at Great Point was erected by private enterprise and ceded to the U. S. Government in 1784. In November, 1816 the Light was entirely destroyed by fire and two years later the present stone edifice was completed. A Keeper's house was built close by with a covered passageway between the house and light for use in bad weather. This house and outbuildings were later burned, leaving only the Light now standing. (Abstract: "Wrecks Around Nantucket", Gardner, 1915.

From 1867 to 1890 there were 43 shipwrecks within the jurisdiction of Great Point Light. (Abstract: Journal kept at Great Point authorized by Thomas A. Jenkins, Secretary Lighthouse Board) As it was believed that one cause of this was that vessels mistook Great Point Light for the Cross Rip Lightship; a red, or danger, sector was added to the beam of the light to eliminate this danger.

In 1933 Keeper William L. Anderson took 350 visitors out to Great Point Light in his automobile which he had equipped with special balloon tires -- an innovation then, but a practice which is now very popular, especially with fishermen surf-casting for bluefish and bass in the rip at Great Point.

- C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: serial view in Aerial Views of Nantucket, Massachusetts by Henry Lang, 1926; old photograph showing Light-keeper's house and smaller buildings in Fifty Glimpses of Nantucket Island by John F. Murphy, Boston, 1897; photograph in 106 Views of Nantucket by John Henry Robinson, Washington, D. C., 1911.

2. Bibliography:

Nantucket Historical Association Proceedings 1933  
Historic Nantucket, July 1956.

Snow, Edward Rowe. Famous New England Lighthouses.  
Boston: The Yankee Publishing Company, 1945.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
August, 1969

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Simple early 19th century building type necessary to the growing maintenance and commercial development of the nation; tapered cylindrical stone masonry tower, cast iron light housing and observation deck, automatic light; hyphen; brick masonry maintenance building.
2. Condition of Fabric: Good; openings are closed to prevent vandalism; sea damage at base of tower.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions:
  - a. Tower base: 24' - 2" diameter.
  - b. Tower base and maintenance building: 40' - 0".
  - c. Vertical, grade to top of ventilator-finial: 72' - 8".
2. Foundations: Stone masonry where revealed, obscured by drifting sand.
3. Wall construction:
  - a. Tower: Bearing wall stone masonry semi-dressed, random coursing, exterior painted white.
  - b. Maintenance Building: 12" brick masonry, common bond obscured by white paint.
4. Structural system: Bearing wall, iron plate decks in tower; round brick vault in hyphen between tower and maintenance building; plates are welded and/or bolted.
5. Chimney: None.
6. Stoop: Stone and concrete masonry stoop at entrance to maintenance building and tower.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors:
    - 1.) Maintenance Building: Stone lintel, wood frame, flush door with louvered panel insert.
    - 2.) Maintenance Building: Remains of doorway west elevation closed with dutch door with a cabinet in lower portion, this covered with vertical siding at exterior.
    - 3.) Light housing: Plate door 2' - 0" by 4' - 0".

b. Windows:

- 1.) Maintenance Building: Remains of six-over-six single hung windows boarded shut on exterior.
- 2.) Tower: four-over-four single hung windows, wood frame, iron plate sill, boarded shut.
- 3.) Light housing: Fixed rectangular sheet glass 2' - 1" horizontal by 5' - 11" vertical.

8. Roofing: Gable roof on Maintenance Building and hyphen, wood shingles painted red, ridge board, no eaves; tower has peaked roof composed of triangular iron plates, cast iron gutter in a cyma reversa profile forming cornice, iron pipe downspout; spherical roof vent-finial with two rows of circular perforations, two-prong lightning rod.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Ground level: Maintenance space houses two diesel engines serving as generators, control panels, battery banks in hyphen and in circular space at base of tower; three semicircular niches and recessed window openings in walls of tower; spiral cast iron stairway, rope handrail; plaster walls and ceiling in Maintenance Building, painted brick in hyphen and tower; concrete floors; vertical board and batten door between Maintenance Building and hyphen.
- b. Second level: Circular space, plate deck, segmental partition of vertical car siding at center, remains of door frame at stairway to third level; cast iron stairway, perforated treads, stringers in tendrill pattern.
- c. Third level: Circular space, plate deck; cast iron base of lighting apparatus at center, marked with plate labeled with raised letters, "L. SAUTTER & CLE, CONSTRUCTERS A PARIS"; vertical car siding walls; ladder built of steel rods to light housing level.
- d. Light housing level: Polygonal space of twelve equal sides with lighting apparatus at center, exterior observation platform at perimeter; light housing composed of iron plate curb, operational circular vents located in curb of alternate panels, hooded vents at exterior; fixed glass panes; panel

of red stained glass at northwest interior corner of housing; perforated cast iron base, lens constructed in rings of glass prisms and lighting apparatus at center of housing, four struts and center ring support upper portion of lens; door to observation platform swings out; strap iron railings, pipe balusters with ball finials; deck of housing and platform formed of triangular plates; segmental domed ceiling of triangular plates painted white.

D. Site:

The Great Point Light is located on a spit of land at the northeastern corner of Nantucket Island opposite Monomoy Island below Cape Cod, marking the Point Rip and Great Round Shoal Channel between the Atlantic Ocean and Nantucket Sound. A chainlink fence, partly in ruins, encloses the Light; scattered masonry rubble to the south; tank for diesel fuel at east side of Maintenance Building. Early photographs indicate that site contour has radically changed, permitting water to reach the base of the Light during heavy seas, endangering the structure.

Prepared by F. Blair Reeves, AIA  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
August 13, 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of the 1969 Historic American Buildings Survey summer project on Nantucket, Massachusetts. This is the fourth project of a continuing HABS comprehensive survey of the early architecture and urban design of Nantucket financed by a grant from the Nantucket Historical Trust.

The project was under the general supervision of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Director was Professor F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A., of the University of Florida. Student architects who assisted in the preparation of the measured drawings were John D. Davenport (Texas A & M University), Edward Bondi (University of Florida), R. Allen Eskew (Louisiana State University), and Roger H. Grunke (University of Florida). Historical information was provided by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Photographs are by Jack E. Boucher of Linwood, New Jersey. The material was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Mrs. Constance Werner Ramirez, July 1971.